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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 003192

SIPDIS

NSC FOR WILDER AND PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [MOPS](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: PRIVY COUNCILORS TELL AMBASSADOR: NO COUP, KING IN
RELATIVELY GOOD HEALTH

REF: A. BANGKOK 3167 (THAKSIN CONVICTED)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 3154 (EX-COP THREATENS)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b,d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Privy Councilors Prem Tinsulanonda and Siddhi Savetsila separately told the Ambassador on October 22 that the Thai Army would not launch a coup. The Ambassador welcomed this assurance and explained the USG could not accept a coup or coup-like action. Prem spoke well of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat and specifically praised Somchai's public acceptance of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's recent conviction. Prem indicated he was open to some form of constitutional amendment, so long as changes were not intended simply to help alleviate pressure on Thaksin. The Ambassador reiterated USG policy to Siddhi, who said he did not envision any military solution to the standoff, but he had a vague vision of some sort of "people's power" movement that would establish a committee of reputable figures to assist in governance for a period of two to three years. Both Prem and Siddhi remarked that King Bhumibol was in relatively good health. Siddhi claimed the King had supported the Queen's appearance at the recent funeral of a PAD supporter.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Prem's remarks about PM Somchai were surprisingly positive, and we hope that this is a meaningful sign that the government and its opponents can, if not reach an accommodation, tolerate each other. We are hopeful that both men were sincere in their statements to the effect that they recognize the current standoff cannot be solved through a coup. Siddhi clearly is trying to formulate some other way forward; he appears not yet ready to operationalize the concept he sketched out for the Ambassador. The King's "healthy" public appearance belies accounts which surfaced while he was out of the limelight during the past month that he was failing. End Summary and Comment.

MODERATE TONE FROM PREM

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador called on Privy Council President Prem

Tinsulanonda for a one-hour one-on-one discussion on October 22. Prem, in an upbeat mood, said he did not foresee a coup. Both sides in the current stalemate wanted to avoid violence, he said. The Ambassador welcomed Prem's statement, explaining that any coup or coup-like action would not be acceptable to the USG. Prem said that he and all his compatriots understood well the USG position.

14. (C) Prem said Prime Minister Somchai was a "good man" and was doing a "very good job." He said sympathetically that Somchai was in a difficult position, because he was Thaksin Shinawatra's brother-in-law, but he lauded Somchai's public reaction to Thaksin's October 21 conviction (Somchai publicly accepted the court's decision, according to local press reports) as appropriate and helpful.

15. (C) The Ambassador asked Prem's view on possible constitutional amendment (which Somchai had raised -- septel). Prem said the current constitution was fairly good and did not require radical revisions. Prem said he was open to some form of amendment, but this would not be acceptable if changes were intended simply to help Thaksin. He said he would not support Somchai, moreover, if he attempted to redraft the entire constitution.

16. (C) Prem condemned Thaksin for failing to show remorse after his conviction. He said Thaksin was intelligent but unable to accept that he had done anything wrong.

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Prem's view of former top police officer Salang Bunnag, who had threatened to clear anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protestors from Government House (ref B). Prem laughed dismissively, saying that Salang was an irrational person who

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had little influence and did not deserve to be taken seriously. He also added that he did not believe PAD would leave the Government House compound in the near future. (Note: Later in the day, Salang did gather a crowd of thousands for a religious ceremony at which speakers criticized anti-government protestors, but he postponed his plan to evict demonstrators from Government House. End Note.)

18. (C) The Ambassador asked Prem's view of recent Thai-Cambodia border tension. Prem recounted the history of the two countries' rival claims to Preah Vihear temple, expressed support for continued bilateral dialogue, and said that existing mechanisms for Thai-Cambodian coordination on border issues had not functioned well.

SIDDHI LOOKING FOR NEW MECHANISM

19. (C) Later in the day on October 22, the Ambassador and poloff called on Privy Councilor Siddhi Savetsila. The Ambassador reiterated the USG position that a coup or coup-like action would not be acceptable. Siddhi said he did not know how political actors would resolve the current standoff, but he did not envision a coup. He also said the Democrat Party and a large portion of the Senate would refuse to go along with Somchai's plan for constitutional amendment. Siddhi spoke vaguely of a type of "people's power" action, similar to that by opponents of President Marcos in the Philippines, adding that the people engaged in such a movement would need the military "to protect them," although there was no military solution to the standoff.

10. (C) Siddhi envisioned the establishment of a "Committee to Revive Democracy," consisting of respected figures such as former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, scholar Pramote Nakhornatap, Democrat Party officials Abhisit Vejjajiva and Korn Chatikavanij, as well as other unnamed "clean people" from the military and the (now seemingly defunct) Palang Dharma party, formerly associated with PAD co-leader Chamlong Srimuang. Siddhi said this Committee could play a (not

clearly defined) role in governance for two to three years; during that time, the parliament could also be reshaped to include (selected) representatives of various social groups, as the PAD had advocated, although they would comprise less than the 70 percent representation that PAD initially proposed.

¶11. (C) Siddhi said that, under his vision, the Prime Minister could be any figure acceptable to all sides. As the Ambassador probed Siddhi's vision, however, it became clear that Siddhi's concept was notional and far from fully thought-out. Siddhi mentioned that some of the figures who had gathered at his home to discuss the way forward included Chamlong Srimuang; academic Pramote Nakhornatap, academic Chai-anam Samudavanija; Army General Saprang Kalayanamitra; and Constitutional Court Justice Jarun Pakditanakul. Siddhi was accompanied at the October 22 meeting with the Ambassador by MFA Deputy Director General of the East Asian Department Pisanu Suvanajata.

¶12. (C) The Ambassador noted that elected officials would need to be at the heart of any democracy; Siddhi did not respond directly, but reiterated that Thailand needed officials who would work honestly for the King and the people of Thailand.

¶13. (C) Siddhi clearly remained antagonistic toward Thaksin, saying the former Prime Minister was still "damaging the country," and had sought to publish a book in China that contained material critical of King Bhumibol. Siddhi denounced PM Somchai for having in the past worked on Thaksin's behalf, including by bribing judges, and he said that the Royal Thai Police Chief would testify that Somchai himself had ordered the October 7 crackdown on PAD protestors at the parliament. Siddhi claimed Somchai's wife, Yaowapa (a sister of Thaksin), was receiving a 30 percent payoff in return for government contracts, far in excess of traditional rates. (Comment: This is the first time we have heard a claim that Yaowapa is exploiting her husband's position for

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personal gain; we do not consider the claim implausible. End Comment.)

¶14. (C) Siddhi viewed PAD as providing essential support to the monarchy. "If we lose PAD, we lose the battle," he said. He related that he and Prem had advised the King to show support for the PAD after the October 7 clash, and he claimed the King had supported the Queen's appearance at the funeral of one of the PAD supporters killed in the incident. The King subsequently thanked Siddhi for his advice (according to Siddhi). Siddhi said he and Prem were the only Privy Councilors advising the King and Queen on the political standoff.

¶15. (C) When he saw television coverage of the crackdown on the morning of October 7, Siddhi said, he had called Prem to urge military support for the PAD. Siddhi lamented that Army Commander Anupong simply assembled 200 men from each branch of the military, who stood by and did not intervene.

KING'S HEALTH

¶16. (C) The Ambassador remarked to Prem that King Bhumibol had looked healthy in an October 20 public appearance. Prem said the King was healthier than he had been in recent months; the King was able to walk without needing a cane. Prem remarked that the King had a very determined personality, which carried him through difficult times. Siddhi echoed Prem's view, claiming that the King did regular walking exercises in a water tank at his Hua Hin Palace. (Siddhi, who looked less energetic than the last time he met with the Ambassador, remarked that he (Siddhi) had emphysema and was unable to stand for long without having pain in his leg and back.)

